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Is Iran an Offensives Realist or a Defensive Realist? A Theoretical Reflection on Iranian Motives for Creating Instability

Rusty Treviño

After examining Iran's actions and capabilities, the findings clearly indicate that Iran is acting in a defensive manner to protect against conventional invasion. While Iran has supported exporting Islamic Revolution, Shiite takeover of States, and State interference through militias and terrorist groups; all these actions do not create a network of offensive capabilities to become a hegemony they merely allow Iran to create crippling instability in the case of war or invasion. Iran's nuclear program is geared towards having a nuclear capability, not a nuclear weapon. This shows a fixation on deterrence of traditional State invasion. Much of Iran's military capabilities could be considered irregular and is geared to resistance, not invasion.

Another finding is increased repression of traditional regime stake-holders, most notably reformers, elected officials, and leftist clerics; it appears that a new regime of an altered State power structure has replaced the above actors with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its affiliates. The term regime no longer refers to clerical bodies and elected officials, but to the IRGC with support from the Ayatollah. In this deal, the Ayatollah is given protection from competing State entities and the ability to continue administering the country as he sees fit, in exchange the IRGC continues to receive huge chunks of the Iranian economy that they use to enrich themselves. Meaning, the focus of the new regime is defense and survival in order to continue their goals, not expansion. Continuing containment and disruption is recommended and military action is discouraged.

Iran in International Theory

The west has often looked on Iran as a threat and a genuine problem for regional stability in the Middle East. International relations theory has two distinct theories about its aggressive behavior; the first idea is that Iran sees a chance to become a regional hegemony, meaning it intends to take all opportunities and push itself into the dominant possibly even imperial position in the Middle East: economically, culturally and politically. The other main vein of thought revolves around the idea of defensive realism, this theory proclaims that States engage in aggressive behavior designed to protect them in the chaotic and unpredictable world of international politics. In examining both theories and Iranian history, a clearer picture will emerge showing Iranian interests, motivations, and endgame. The results conclude a mismatch of perception, Iran's neighbors and would be competitors see it as a potential hegemony looking to control and exploit them, while Iran sees itself as survivor in a world full of enemies, clinging to its familiar tactics of extra-legal violence and terrorism for lack of a better option.¹

¹ Michael R. Gordon, "Iraq's Master of Chaos in Iraq Still Vexes US," *New York Times* October 2, 2012.

A Brief on Contemporary Iranian History

The current Iranian State was born in 1979, the product of a societal revolution against a western ally many in Iran considered a puppet. The revolution was the product of many different groups; students, communists, liberals, and Islamists among many others.² The Islamists eventually took over the revolution and the country, and then installed a theocracy with an exterior layer of electoralism. This theocracy was formed under a branch of Islam that was contrary to most of their Sunni Arab neighbors and rulers, this Iranian branch was Shi'a Islam. Unfortunately the Shi'a were and still are a majority in neighboring Iraq, the problem for Iran was that Iraq was brutally ruled by minority Sunnis and the infamous Saddam Hussein. Many in Iraq saw the new Shi'a theocracy as a grave threat to their Sunni supremacy, they viewed the only way to contain the new Shi'a threat was to destroy the theocracy and absorb the country while the regime was still weak and in its infancy.³ This is not to say that Iraq was completely defensively minded, they themselves were the striving hegemony and consuming neighboring Iran (and its natural resources) would have made them the undisputed regional great power.⁴ The argument about which motivation drove the invasion of Iran can be argued, but both of those ideas of thought were present. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran with the tacit approval of the U.S., who was still angry about the dethroning of their ally the Shah and the hostage crisis.⁵ The U.S. would even fight on Iraq's side in an undeclared naval war, sinking Iranian ships in the middle of the Iraq-Iran conflict which also featured chemical weapons use by Iraq.⁶ This would reinforce the distrust set in motion by the western aided 1953 coup against the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq.⁷ These events set the tone for the U.S.-Iranian relationship that would continue until this day. It is this tension that continues to confuse the question of whether Iran wants to be the hegemony of the Middle East or if they're just defensively engaged in whatever behavior they feel will protect their regime.

Shi'ite Revolution

The Shi'ite have at many times and places in history been an oppressed people, since the days of its founding. It is a messianic sect that believes in the eventual rising of the hidden 12th Imam who would right all the wrongs and smite the wicked. An oppressed group in many countries (even in some where they are the majority) the Shi'ite has seen themselves as a people destined to suffer.⁸ This changed after the Iranian Revolution which showed that the Hidden Imam was not needed to make their world better, they could take freedom from the Sunnis and now they had a supporter in the struggle, the Iranian Shi'ite theocratic State.⁹ The Iranian revolution sent shockwaves of fear through the Arab-Sunni community that many felt threatened by a possible Iranian

² Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Crumbling Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* 82:1 (Jan. - Feb. 2003): 44-57.

³ Iran Chamber Society, "The History of Iran: The Iran-Iraq War," *Non-Profit Cultural Organization*, 2012, available at: http://www.iranchamber.com/history/iran_iraq_war/iran_iraq_war3.php.

⁴ Roger Hardy, "The Iran-Iraq war: 25 years on." *BBC News* September 22, 2005.

⁵ Ian Lustick, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective," *International Organization* 51: 4 (Autumn 1997): 653-83.

⁶ Bruce Riedel, "The Last Time We Fought Iran" *The Daily Beast* July 6, 2012.

⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran," *Science & Society* 65:2 (Summer 2001): 182-215.

⁸ Cockburn, Patrick, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner Publishing, 2008).

⁹ Egger, Vernon O., *A History of the Muslim World since 1260* (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008).

backed Shiite rebellion. Decades later the Sunni-Shiite divide continues to fuel intrigue and suspicion whenever a State in the Middle East finds itself with the possibility of an uncertain future.¹⁰

The Many Cold Wars of Iran

Theocratic Iran has been involved in a cold war of subterfuge, assassination, terrorism, and intimidation since its birth. The struggle for its birth, the eight year war for its existence, and the continual threat of instability from many neighbors and great powers has made the life of the regime increasingly erratic and dangerous. This has lead Iran into a sense of urgency and the need to create alliances with those that can help them survive and strike back against geopolitical meddling; meaning terrorist groups, including both Hezbollah and Hamas, but also with the Assad family who rule Syria. Some of these problems are due to Iran's ingratiating into the Arab world's problem of Israel and Palestine, and its fiery rhetoric about "wiping Israel off the map." They have done this while seeking nuclear technology and it has not helped their cause of security, and in fact has earned them Israel as a belligerent unlike any in the region. In the media there are many separate reports of Iran engaging in cold war type activities with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the U.S. Iran may proclaim its ambitions loudly, its neighbors believe it, and some scholars may say so, but examining the possibilities seems to refute this idea.¹¹

Iran as an Offensive Realist

In Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, if Iran was the one and only great power of the region they would attempt to reach hegemony in their region, through conquest.¹² In this context a great power is country capable of credibly threatening the survival of neighboring countries and exerting a global influence that benefits their country. This would be called the offensive realist theory, in which Iran would use its power and influence to become an imperialistic hegemony in de facto control the Middle East through intimidation, enriching itself on the oil wealth of its exploited neighbors. This is probably the narrative that the Arab Gulf States, Israel, and Turkey believe; the idea that Iran flexes its muscles and its connection to oppressed Shiites to create a strength that would allow it to force others to obey its will. When examining Iran's rivals Israel and Saudi Arabia, they are probably not great powers because of lack of population to threaten the survival of Iran as a State that would have to be occupied. They are however middle economic powers which allow them many resources with which to slow what they believe is Iran's attempts to remake the Middle East. Turkey might fit the great power description better, but its institutional focus on government reform and economic growth has distracted it from attempts to gain geopolitical expansion of influence and it is not strong enough (militarily, politically, economically) to definitively exert influence on unwilling neighbors. Turkey's priorities have changed after the Arab Spring, it seems to be moving into the belief that Iran has overreached, especially in its actions with Syria and the Turks perception of Iran's improving relations with Kurdish terrorist and rebel groups.¹³

¹⁰ John R. Bradley, "Saudi Arabia's invisible hand in the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs* October 13, 2011.

¹¹ Trita Parsi, "Israel and the Origins of Iran's Arab Option: Dissection of a Strategy Misunderstood." *Middle East Journal* 60:3 (Summer, 2006): 493-512.

¹² Mearsheimer, John. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

¹³ Staff Article, "Turkey, Iran Friction Deepening on Syria," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly* (August 9); Damien McElroy, "Syria and Iran 'backing Kurdish terrorist group', says Turkey," *The Telegraph*, September 2012.

However one categorizes Iran, they are expanding their regional influence, this means that the United States as the only superpower, has a distinct interest in keeping them from establishing their own regional dominance which would upset American power and interests in the region. In offensive realism theory, this also brings the United States into the act of balancing the Iranian menace mostly with economic sanctions aimed at crippling the Iranian economy and its ability to continue its nuclear program and perceived Hegemonic expansion. In this balancing Israel (Netanyahu) continues to try and push the U.S. into a conflict to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities by continually asking and pressuring the United States to draw a "red line" which when crossed by Iran will be the agreed point at which a bombing will commence.¹⁴ The United States has continually denied drawing a red line, despite repeated pressure from Israel.¹⁵ The scenario Israel envisions is that an Iran with nuclear bomb technology and ties to terrorism could act as the mastermind in a nuclear extortion plot. This is one of two scenarios Israel views while the other has Iran giving out nukes to terrorists to destroy Israel. Saudi Arabia also fears the possibility of nuclear extortion by Iran while many fear that Iran getting nuclear technology would set off an arms race with Saudi Arabia, which over many years would divert government funds that could have gone to improving living standards. This could further destabilize the region by increasing popular economic and social grievances.¹⁶

All of that information aside, when compared to past attempted hegemonies, Iran doesn't fit the model because it requires conquest. All hegemonies and contending hegemonies have used conquest because that is the only avenue of the kind of State expansion of population, natural resources, fertile land, and geographical positioning that would allow the necessary State extraction of resources to continue a program of national expansion. Historical examples include: the U.S. constantly expanding west, and then into the Pacific and the Caribbean, imperial Japan was constantly conquering pieces of Asia from 1895 onwards, Nazi Germany forced annexation of the Czechs and Austria before conquering most of Europe, and Saddam's Iraq tried and failed to conquer Iran then succeeded with Kuwait and then threatened conquest of Saudi Arabia. Having influence like Iran has, is not the same as having exploitable land, resources, and people gained through conquest. If Iran is planning a hegemonic adventure, they would need more human, economic, and societal resources than what they have; influencing Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and other Arab Shiite filled countries is far different from conquering or exploiting them in the name of Persian imperialism. Even their military is far different from the industrial war machines associated with imperialism it has more irregular strategies designed for resistance and asymmetric warfare more than for traditional State-to-State warfare.¹⁷

Iran as the Defensive Realist

¹⁴ Fareed Zakaria, Fareed, "Netanyahu pushes for a war the US doesn't want," *The Daily Star*, September 15, 2012; Graham Allison, "Red Lines in the Sand," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, October 12, 2012.

¹⁵ Allison, "Red Lines in Sand."

¹⁶ The Associated Press, "Prince Hints Saudi Arabia May Join Nuclear Arms Race," *New York Times*, December 2011; Jeffrey Goldberg, Jeffrey, "Saudi Arabia Promises to go Nuclear if Iran does," *The Atlantic*, February 7, 2012.

¹⁷ Ahmad Reza Babaei, Ahmad Reza, "Israel's concerns and Iran's nuclear program," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43:6 (Feb. 9 - 15 2008): 21-25; Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," In *The Iran Primer*, ed. Robin Wright, 2010; Michael V. Rienzi, "Iran's Response to a US attack," *Small Wars Journal*, February 20, 2012.

In the schema of defensive realism, Iran is expanding its influence and ties to non-state groups in order to safeguard itself. Through its non-state actor allies and its important position on the oil shipping Straits of Hormuz (which they have threatened to close), Iran has created for itself a defensive position that would be hard to eject without causing serious upheaval to the region. Not only does Iran have ties to Hezbollah and Hamas, but they also have strong ties into Iraq and no one actually knows how deeply or what their Iraqi connections are capable of.¹⁸ The potential collapse of the Assad regime offers even more opportunity for Iran to support non-state actors, or Alawite (Alawites are another traditionally oppressed Muslim sect) militias that will continue to fight long after the Assad regime has collapsed. It is also suspected the Iran has connections to Shiite groups in Yemen, but no one really knows how deep Iran's connections are throughout the Middle East.¹⁹ This means that Iran's defensive position has been created in a way that an aggressive threat against Iran could set off a regional blaze of conflict with terrorists groups and militias who presumably have access to Iranian armaments as has allegedly happened in Yemen, Syria, Iraq.²⁰

This idea of defensive realism puts of Iran's transgressions in the form of defensive posturing. This makes some sense from an Iranian perspective since their view of western influence is particularly negative and rooted with its own experience of imperialism, foreign spheres of influence, and economic interference; whereas the west sees Iran's intransigence as evidence of an aggressive extra-legal belligerent. To Iran, these continual transgressions are a continuation of the battle for freedom from western imperialism. This sense was probably reinforced when the U.S. orchestrated collapses of neighboring regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This as well as when George W. Bush labeled Iran in the Axis of Evil, an even further indication that many in the U.S. are still seeking regime change. With these kinds of bellicose threats coming from the U.S., it is only natural that a country would posture even further into its defensive position and do everything possible to showcase its ability to destabilize and wreak havoc if their existence is threatened, which it constantly is.

The Mismatch of Iran as Possible Hegemony

When examining the possibility of Iran as possible hegemony we must first consider whether they are in fact a great power in the region and then we must figure whether they are in fact the only great power or one of several in the region. Iran by most measures is not a great power, certainly not economically, industrially, or technologically. It does have a rather large economy usually ranking in the top twenty, but not big enough to dominate its neighbors and always lagging behind Turkey.²¹ The country's population is around 75 million, larger than much of the Arab world, but still comparable to Turkey and much smaller than Egypt.²² Industrially and

¹⁸ Staff Article, "Iran renews Hormus closure threats," *Reuters News Agency*, July 15, 2012; Greg Bruno, "State Sponsors (Of Terror): Iran," *The Council on Foreign Relations Website*, October 13, 2011; Baer, Robert, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2008).

¹⁹ Staff Article, "Yemen Seizes Iranian Arms," *UPI News Agency*, October 11, 2012; Staff Article, "Yemen arrests prompt President's warning to Iran," *BBC News*, July 18, 2012.

²⁰ Matthew Weaver and Brian Whitaker, "Syria receiving Iranian arms 'almost daily' via Iraq," *The Guardian* September 20, 2012; Ed O'Keefe and Joby Warrick, "Weapons prove Iranian role in Iraq, U.S. Says," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2011.

²¹ Staff Work, CIA Files, CIA Fact Book- Iran and Turkey. Last Updated October 4, 2012

²² Staff Work, CIA Files, CIA Fact Book- Iran, Turkey, and Egypt. Last Updated October 4, 2012

technologically Iran has been making great strides in expanding indigenous military technologies and expanding domestic car production with its use of oil currency. According to the OICA or the International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers, Iran is among the top fifteen in car manufacturing and has doubled its capacity in the last seven years.²³ This government directed centralized expansion of economic capacity has come at the price of market efficiency, creating problems with a bloated governmental sector and terrible crony capitalism and corruption that badly decrease its capacity and sustainability.²⁴ Despite continually expanding industrial capacity, the government's mismanagement of the economy and monetary policy along with international sanctions has created a GDP that has remained stagnant and is unable to create enough jobs to salve the dissatisfaction of the people stemming from shortages of goods, overinflated money, and lack of scientific and economic opportunities.²⁵

So despite a constantly improving industrial and technological capacity (which can also include a continually improving nuclear program) Iran is still not in a position to dominate its neighbors because the State is not efficient enough to convert its gains into a strong State capacity, because much of the gains are lost to corruption and ineffective government. Additionally these gains are paid for by oil revenue they are not self-reinforcing and subject to the fluctuations in the market. Meaning that when oil prices drop so does the lifeblood of these industries, which is widely attributed to Saudi Arabia's orchestrated 2011 energy output increase in order to shrink Iran's energy revenues and further destabilize the regime still reeling from sanctions and protests.²⁶ All of these factors plus Iran's zealous spending on foreign adventures, energy subsidies combined with western sanctions has created high inflation rate in the country, with some watchers calling it hyperinflation.²⁷ Despite the shaky status of the regime, Iran is not deterred; flat-lining economic growth, a failed revolution, growing monetary inflation, and a squeeze being put on them from a diverse group of Americans, Israelis, Turks, and Arabs has not stopped Iran from pursuing their goals. All this information on regime survival may seem contradictory, but it makes more sense when the conflict is examined as an anti-imperialist pillar of legitimacy in the Iranian Islamic Republic.

Iran and the Bomb

Iran's nuclear program has quickly become a huge concern among its neighbors and is the leading cause for many of the sanctions being put against them. Saudi Arabian officials have made many statements that if Iran achieves a bomb, it probably will as well.²⁸ This leads to a terrifying problem of an arms race in the Middle East, a region rife with unstable states and violent non-state actors. Israel has made its pronouncements well known, after Iranian officials said Israel should be wiped off the map, stopping Iran's march towards nuclear weapons would stop at no limits. To this end, Israel and particularly Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the

²³ CIA Fact Book- Iran; OICA Website. Staff Work, Production Statistics, available at: <http://oica.net/category/production-statistics/>.

²⁴ CIA Fact Book- Iran.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Andrew Scott Cooper, "The Oil Wars," *The Daily Beast*, October 13, 2011.

²⁷ Joby Warrick, "Food Prices, inflation rises sharply in Iran," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2012 ; Addison Wiggin, "In Terms of Hyperinflation, Iran going way of Weimar," *Forbes Magazine*, October 10, 2012.

²⁸ The Associated Press, "Prince Hints Saudi Arabia May Join Nuclear Arms Race," *New York Times*, December 6, 2011.

defense minister Ehud Barak, have engaged in a campaign for U.S. support concerning a military strike on Iran, citing the imminent danger they face from a country that has threatened to destroy them.²⁹

When Iran agrees to this narrative, they are showing support for the Palestinian cause, and to a lesser extent to the Arab world that sees no movement towards a solution for Palestine. It is bluster aimed at rallying support and building a base of support for Iranian influence in the Arab world that has long seemingly given up on finding a solution to the Palestinian plight, but is it not emblematic of Iranian intentions to use nuclear weapons to destroy Israel, especially since Israel most likely possesses nuclear weapons. Though what many fear isn't the mutually assured destruction of Iran and Israel, but rather the terrorist use of nuclear weapons provided by Iran to destroy Israel. It wouldn't seem to be in Iran's rational interest to endanger their country with such a reckless act. This is the idea that all States are rational actors and in the narrative of Iran as nuclear arms dealer, it doesn't work because it is too irrational. Even in the highest echelons of Israeli leadership, it is acknowledged that Iran is a rational actor.³⁰ This is not to say that Israel doesn't have genuine fears, but when they are rationally calculated, those fears don't add up to the narrative being offered by Benjamin Netanyahu.

It is known that all States seek security and what is apparent is that Iran getting nuclear weapons even nuclear technology, threatens Israel's security regardless of Iran's true intentions. It is rational for Israel to do everything in its power to prevent this, *even if it means embroiling the U.S. in another war or military action*, something Netanyahu has arguably been trying to do since 1996.³¹ The reasoning behind this is that Israel does not have the capacity to wage a war the size they need to in order to stop Iran's nuclear program, more on this briefly. This combined with Iran's ties to both Hezbollah and Hamas could create an uncontrollable storm of violence and chaos for Israel that would be untenable if they did not have U.S. support on several levels. This is also not considering the economic upheaval promised by Iran in the disruption of energy and oil shipments through the Straits of Hormuz.³² All these elements will be considered in their inter-connected context after the possibility of a successful strike is examined.

In the background of all these scenarios, is the question of whether an air-strike would even work in stopping or delaying Iran's nuclear program. Robert Gates has stated that an air-strike would not put a halt to the Iranian program and would also be a catastrophic error.³³ Though in the 2012 Vice Presidential Debate Joe Biden expressed a belief that the U.S. had the capacity to stop Iranian production with an airstrike saying, "We feel quite confident we could deal a serious blow to the Iranians."³⁴ In Israel several former heads of intelligence have decried the idea of a strike as gravely unnecessary and opening a Pandora's Box of troubles.³⁵ So while some in the

²⁹ Aaron David Miller, "Netanyahu's red line isn't getting him anywhere," *CNN.com*, September 28, 2012.

³⁰ Reuters, "Israeli military chief: I doubt Iran's 'rational' leadership will make nuclear bomb," *NBC News.com*, April 6, 2012.

³¹ Graham Allison, "Red Lines in the Sand," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 12 October 2012.

³² David Blair, "Iran Threatens to close Straits of Hormuz over EU sanctions," *The Telegraph*, January 23, 2012.

³³ Staff Article, "Gates Warns Against Attack on Iran," *United Press International*, October 4, 2012.

³⁴ Vice Presidential Debate, Joe Biden, October 11, 2012.

³⁵ Harriet Sherwood, "Ex-Israeli spy boss attacks Netanyahu and Barak over Iran," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2012; Jeffrey Golberg, "Ex-Mossad Chief: Israeli Attack Would Help Iran Go Nuclear," *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2012.

U.S. think that the capacity to stop Iran with an air-strike exists, many in Israel seem to question if it is possible for them to do it alone, as noted above the intelligence community feels that a failed attack against Iran would only accelerate the Iranian race for nuclear technology as a deterrence. U.S. military involvement seems to be the only credible road to potentially stopping Iran, which creates a huge incentive for Israel to find any avenue to drag the U.S. into a conflict in the Middle East, especially when there are so many unknowns as to what the outcome and many possible consequences of an airstrike on Iranian nuclear sites would entail.

The Iranian Race Against Time

In the examination of whether Iran will get nuclear weapon technology it is important know their current capacities and time-line. According to recent reports in October 2012, Iran is still at least 12-14 months away from having a nuclear weapon.³⁶ The breakdown exists at 2-4 months to amass enough highly enriched uranium, and then another 8-10 months to weaponize it. According to IAEA If Iran started created diverting uranium to weaponization the world community would find out and then have several months to stop that process.³⁷ This time-line has been pushed back some by Iran's transfer of some of its already enriched uranium to medical treatment, which has stopped Israeli plans for a strike in the immediate future.³⁸ This is great for momentary consolation, but the truth is that the longer Iran continues their nuclear program, the shorter their time-line will become to weaponize it later.

When all the pieces are put together the unrest in Iran caused by sanctions, Iran diverting its nuclear supply and Israel delaying strike plans, it can be interpreted as a race to survival or destruction for Iran. The west and Israel hope they can push Iranian weaponization back until the regime cracks and breaks under sanctions and civilian revolution. Iran hopes their oppressive apparatus holds out long enough to allow their nuclear efforts to deliver energy and tangible benefits to the people while shortening their breakout time for nuclear weaponization.³⁹ At this point, the research and evidence seems to lead to the idea that Iran does not want a nuclear weapon they want the capability to create a nuclear weapon in a very short time frame. Nuclear weapons offer western justifications for war, but if Iran has the ability to create a nuclear weapon quickly (within the time span of a western military mobilization for an invasion), it offers the deterrence of nuclear weapons without the threat of actually having one—much like other nations who have a nuclear capability, but do not have the weapons.⁴⁰

Recent Struggles within the Iranian State Apparatus

In more recent years there has not just been an Iranian struggle with outside forces, but also power struggles and push for change within the regime for reform.⁴¹ The 1990s brought would-

³⁶ Staff Article AFP, "Iran 'could make nuclear bomb within 10 months'," *The Telegraph*, October 9, 2012.

³⁷ Matt Smith, "CNN Fact Check: Iran and the Bomb," *CNN Online*, October 12, 2012, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/12/politics/fact-check-iran-nuclear/index.html>.

³⁸ Phoebe Greenwood and Damien McElroy, "Israel abandons plans for imminent Iran attack," *The Telegraph*, October 9, 2012.

³⁹ Staff Article AFP, "Iran 'could make nuclear bomb within 10 months'," *The Telegraph*, October 9, 2012.

⁴⁰ Yousaf Butt, "The Rial World," *Foerign Policy Magazine*, October 5, 2012.

⁴¹ Ahmad Ashraf and Ali Banuazizi, "Iran's Torturous Path toward 'Islamic Liberalism'," *International Journal of Politics Culture, and Society* 15:2 (Winter, 2001): 237-256.

be reformers to the forefront of elected office in Iran. There was a small wave of reforms in that time, but it all ended when the reformer President Khatami had most of his reform candidates banned from running for election in a constitutional process by Iran's Guardian Council.⁴² This intrastate struggle ended peacefully with Khatami backing down and then a slow build up of the power of the armed forces under the supervision of the Ayatollah, effectively neutralizing any supposed electoral and constitutional restraints. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even remarked that Iran was becoming a military dictatorship probably referring to the growing power of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This became most apparent after the 2009 Iranian elections in which the reformists candidate were declared losers with many suspicious electoral anomalies.⁴³ This led to the Green Movement, a failed protest movement & revolution against the official results of the 2009 election. The reformers and leftist clerics would now be blocked from running for office and their movement all but neutralized.⁴⁴

Then in 2011 there was even more dramatic conflict from within the new regime. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the conservative president of Iran and the subject of the Green Movement protests was put under pressure by the ruling clerics and parliament. From the small amount of information available, it seems his populist persona was gaining power as he kept subsidies to voters from being cut against the will of Parliament. Ahmadinejad was acting in a way consistent with an elected official concerned with voters. He then started accumulating loyalists in government and strengthening ties within the military.⁴⁵ Ahmadinejad was seen as trying to gain more power and build a political infrastructure for power and influence when he was term limited out of the presidency.⁴⁶ Many thought Ahmadinejad might have been preparing for a coup or some kind of government takeover under the auspices of democratic populism.⁴⁷ This buildup ended with many of his supporters being arrested and his military support evaporating, forcing him to back down or risk imprisonment or death.⁴⁸ This should confirm that hardliners and militarists are in firm control of Iran and that elected officials (conservative or reform) are in danger if they proceed independently of the Ayatollah and the IRGC.

The Amplification of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was founded as a militia by Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 Revolution in order to safeguard the new regime from outside threats, but more as a branch to eliminate ideological opposition and to protect the regime from the traditional Iranian military.⁴⁹ They are also a huge economic piece of the Iranian economy. At first they turned their military construction and engineering towards rebuilding Iran after the

⁴² Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran's president says he failed at reform," *Seattle Times*. December 7, 2004.

⁴³ BBC News, "Clinton warns Iran 'becoming a military dictatorship'," February 15, 2010.

⁴⁴ Muhammad Sahimi, "The widening divide between Iran's clerics," *PBS- Frontline News*, July 2, 2009.

⁴⁵ Jed Babbin, "Ahmadinejad and the Ayatollahs," *Real Clear Politics*, May 12, 2011.

⁴⁶ Neil Macfarquhar, "A Divine Wing Blows Against Iran's President," *New York Times*. June 22, 2011.

⁴⁷ Naja Mohammad Ali, "Is Ahmadinejad's team planning a military coup?" *Al Arabiya News*, October 30, 2011.

⁴⁸ Ali Akbar Dareini and Brian Murphy, "Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran Supreme Leader, Warns Ahmadinejad," *Associated Press*, October 19, 2011.

⁴⁹ Roozbeh Safshekan and Farzen Sabet, "The Ayatollah's Praetorians: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the 2009 Election Crisis," *The Middle East Journal* 64:4 (Autumn 2010): 543-558.

Iran-Iraq war.⁵⁰ The entrance of the IRGC into the economy has since expanded to between \$12-16 billion a year in government contracts alone (this figure is from 2007), which is not counting outside business, illegal activities, and actual net worth which is unknown.⁵¹ Their influence has steadily grown over the years and has become a central component to the regime, especially since 2003. This is a significant time because it marks the end of the reformist movement as a viable electoral force as was admitted by former Iranian President Khatami in 2004.⁵²

When cause and effect processes are examined, it appears the growing strength of the reformist movement threatened the establishment of the conservative clerics and undermined the extremely right-wing Ayatollah himself. It was at this point that the clerics started ruling reformist candidates not eligible for election and the revolutionary guard was able to enter politics and fill the gaps as conservative populists, one of their most popular politicians was a former Basij (a paramilitary militia in the IRGC) member named Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Once in power they were able to grant themselves huge amounts of leverage and economic advantages.⁵³ This ties into the economic debilitating corruption mentioned earlier. Through the use of natural resource money from the regime, the IRGC were able to build an economic empire that according to the U.S. Government, controls parts or all of the National Iranian Oil Company.⁵⁴ This seems to have been in conjunction with the Ayatollah, in a dual understanding that the IRGC protects the Ayatollah and his power in exchange for being able to plunder Iran's wealth with impunity from the dispatched reformist contingent or any would be conservative populist champions.

Understanding all the Narratives Simultaneously

To its neighbors and competitors for influence in the Middle East Iran is a Machiavellian State that ruthlessly schemes to overthrow Sunni regimes and replace them with Shiite puppet regimes. When objectively examined, Iran does not have any of the necessary capacity to become a traditional regional hegemony, and scholars in the literature refuse to even call it (or any Middle Eastern country) a great power.⁵⁵ With the Arab Gulf States and their oil built military machines, united in their distrust of Iran, it is unlikely that Iran could effectively control them.⁵⁶ When combined with Israel and U.S. interests in limiting Iran's influence, Iran does not have any chance to become a legitimate hegemony although the fact that all these players have banded together shows Iran as a potential great power.

⁵⁰ Greg Bruno and Jayshree Bajoria, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," *Council on Foreign Relation Website*, October 12, 2010.

⁵¹ Kim Murphy, "Iran's \$12 Billion Enforcers," *LA Times*, August 26, 2007.

⁵² Dareini, "Iran's president says he failed at reform."

⁵³ Fareed Mohamedi, "The Oil and Gas Industry," *The Iran Primer*, ed. Robin Wright, 2010.

⁵⁴ Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "Iran's Oil Company 'Agent' of Revolutionary Guard Corps," *Bloomberg News*, September 12, 2012.

⁵⁵ Ian Lustick, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political "Backwardness" in Historical Perspective," *International Organization* 51:4 (Autumn 1997): 653-83; Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Raymond A. Hinnebusch. 2002. *Syria & Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*. Routledge Publishing. New York

⁵⁶ Joshua Keating, "Saudi Arabia's Military Shopping Spree," *Foreign Policy Magazine Blog*, August 27, 2012; Josh Rogin, "Petraeus: UAE's air force could take out Iran's," *Foreign Policy Magazine Blog*. December 17, 2012.

If Iran is not the hegemony, then it is the survivor who has persevered through wars, invasions, collapsing neighbors, economic warfare, and an attempted revolution. The problem then is the disconnect; everyone else sees Iran as the threat to regional stability because of its constant accumulation of ill-reputed power through illegitimate tactics, Iran just sees itself as a defensive realist fortifying itself while enemies assault it from all sides. Perceptions are creating reality and narratives are continually self-reinforcing. Both sides are trapped in this created narrative of struggle and neither side can give it up without losing confidence from either the public, the elites in power, or in Iran's case losing a unifying theme that justifies the regime's existence. The next point is that the U.S. and Israel can stall but cannot stop Iran from gaining a nuclear capacity without complete war and economic upheaval, unless the regime is overthrown internally by revolution. Unfortunately this creates an interest from both sides to continue the status-quo; the U.S. refraining from military action as long as Iran refrains from weaponizing their technology. A favorable course for the United States would be to quiet the more belligerent rhetoric and engage Iran while continuing sanctions. This will create a lower level of animosity so that constant threats and recriminations don't lead an unnecessary war and unnecessary economic shocks.